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Sylvia Plath: Motherhood in her Poetry

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- **Introduction**

Sylvia Plath wrote about a really wide range of themes in her poetry; however, one of the most important and recurrent was motherhood. Her thoughts on motherhood were constantly changing and shifting. In this essay, I will discuss how her different approaches to motherhood depended on the situation of her relationship with important people in her life such as her mother or husband and on the pressure of the female standards of society.

For a better appreciation and comprehension of those writings it is necessary to understand the context in which her poetry was created and the situation of the America where she was raised. Her struggle with maternity was a reflection of her struggle with patriarchy. The way in which she wrote about these struggles is one of the reasons why she is considered one of the main confessional poets in the U.S. and a pioneer in feminist writing whose prose and poetry have become more popular and valued with the passing of time.

In order to illustrate her division and conflict more in depth, a selection of poems that belong to different stages of her poetry will be analysed. Plath's poems related to motherhood, maternity and her role as a mother have very different tones that reflect her diverse perspectives and views. Some of her poems are happy, light, hopeful and even humoristic while others have a darker, drearier and more mournful tone. The nature of the poems evolved towards a more intimate and personal one as she grew older, her relationship with Ted Hughes became strained, her vision of the world changed and her mental health deteriorated.

This essay is divided into two main sections. The first one consists of a biography that includes the most relevant events in Sylvia Plath's life, a summary of the historical context in which Sylvia Plath's poetry was produced, an explanation of Confessional Poetry, the main type of poetry that she wrote, and a description of Plath's general characteristics, style and themes. On the other hand, the second part focuses on the analysis of a selection of Plath's poems related to motherhood, "Metaphors", "You're" "Morning Song", "Childless Woman" and "Child"

- **Biography**

Sylvia Plath was an American writer who wrote poetry, one novel and short-stories. She was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on 27 October 1932, the daughter of Otto Plath and Aurelia Schober Plath in a family with Prussian and Austrian ancestry. She also had a younger brother, Warren. Her father was an entomologist specialised in the study of bumblebees and her mother worked for Boston University College of Practical Arts and Letters.

Sylvia Plath's interest in literature started at a very young age. During her childhood and teenage years she was already publishing poems in different magazines and newspapers. This interest in writing led her to obtain a scholarship to continue her studies in Smith College, a private women's art college.

In her first years at Smith College she thrived academically and professionally. She excelled in her classes and published many stories in magazines as *Seventeen* and *Mademoiselle*. After this successful and rewarding experience, she applied for the Harvard writing seminar: however, she was not accepted. As a consequence of this disappointment, she suffered a serious mental breakdown that accounts for her first suicide attempt by ingesting her mother's sleeping pills. She went back to Smith College and graduated *summa cum laude* in 1955 after being treated with electro-convulsive therapy and psychotherapy.

After Smith College, she continued her studies in Newnham College, Cambridge. She travelled and continued publishing in student magazines. During this period, she met Ted Hughes, who would be her future husband and father of her two children. They got married in London on 16 June 1956 and spent some time together in

England until they came back to Boston. In those days, Plath suffered from a severe writer block and resumed her therapy. She also attended a writing seminar at Boston University where she met Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton.

In 1959, she finished the collection of poems that would be published as *The Colossus*. In December the couple moved back to England, where her first daughter, Frieda, was born on 1 April 1960. In 1961, Sylvia suffered a miscarriage and got pregnant of her first son, Nicholas, who was born on 17 January 1962. That is the reason why throughout this period her poems ponder on maternity, pregnancy, sterility and womanhood. Furthermore, her poems reflect her conflict and questioning about motherhood and femininity, as well as her radio play titled *Three Women, a Poem for Three Voices*. The action is set in a “Maternity Ward and round about” and tells the story of three females, one that has just had a baby, one that suffers a miscarriage and a student that gives her baby up for adoption.

Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath’s marriage came to an end in September 1961. Their relationship was severely strained and Ted had even had an affair. All along this time, she wrote some of her better-known poems that would be part of *Ariel* and she was adding the finishing touches to *The Bell Jar*. *The Bell Jar* is Sylvia Plath’s only novel and arguably her most famous creation. This semi-autobiographical novel was first published in England in 1963 under the pseudonym “Victoria Lucas.” It would take three years to be published under her real name and eight years to be finally published in the U.S. in 1973. By the time it was published in the U.S., the book had a quite different reception because Plath had already become a famous poet in both sides of the Atlantic.

Finally, on 11 February 1963, at 30 years old, Sylvia decided to take her own life by poisoning herself with carbon monoxide sticking her head inside her kitchen's oven. She was buried in Heptonstall church, West Yorkshire.

Plath was a quite prolific author for her short life. Her literary production includes poems, novel, letters, diaries and children's books. Some of her poetry collections were published and edited posthumously by Ted Hughes. She is also the only American writer that has ever been awarded the Pulitzer Prize posthumously.

Her most prominent poetry collections include: *The Colossus and Other Poems* (1960), *Ariel* (1965), *Three Women: a Monologue for Three Voices* (1968) *Crossing the Water* (1971) and *Winter Trees* (1971). And amid her production in prose the most important works are her only novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963), *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963* (1975) a collection of the letters she wrote throughout her life, and *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (1982) a transcription of her personal journals.

Even though she was already a well-known author when she was alive, Sylvia Plath's popularity has increased notably since she died in 1963. "A writer and a mother, Plath provided a model for a new generation of poets of the consciousness-raising movement, and she remains enormously popular especially with young female readers." (Brown & Taylor 2017)

• Sylvia Plath in Context

Although the most common themes in her literary production are fairly universal, the historical context in which the oeuvres were created is relevant and useful for a better understanding of her worries, thoughts, actions and concerns. She was alive when the Second World War, the Holocaust and the Cold War took place. These events deeply marked her life and literary production. However, she was not a Jew and she did not experienced the wars or prosecutions directly, that is why, according to Deborah Nelson, some scholars have criticized the writings in which she uses war or holocaust imagery claiming that she immorally appropriated the historical experience and suffering of others to express her own pain (26-27). For instance, in both her poems “Lady Lazarus” and “Daddy”, the poetic speakers are Jewish girls victims of the Holocaust. In “Lady Lazarus” the poetic speaker’s skin is described as “bright as a Nazi’s lampshade” and her face as “featureless, fine/ Jew linen” and in “Daddy” she uses imagery to evoke Jews being transported by train to concentrations camps. (An engine, an engine/Chuffing me off like a Jew./A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen./I began to talk like a Jew./I think I may well be a Jew.) (Nelson, 26)

Moreover, similar accusations of appropriating other people’s suffering arise from her poem “Cut”. In those lines, she was suspected of making private use of public horror. In “Cut” she creates a similar analogy between the literary subject of the poem, who has cut her thumb chopping onions, with imagery related to the Ku Klux Klan, the Russians and Native Americans. (Rose, 207)

However, not all scholars agree with this criticism. Susan Gubar claims that “her transposition makes sense, and resembles the sense of personal connection to events not experienced firsthand articulated by many of her contemporaries [...] Like a number of poets in her generation, Plath viewed the Shoah as a test case for poetry and, indeed, for the imagination as a vehicle for conveying what it means for the incomprehensible to occur.”(168-169) Furthermore, she also assures that in her poem “Getting There” Plath shows “horrificed compassion for captive shades being hurtled by the on-rushing fatality of history toward an irrevocable, incomprehensible death sentence” by using Holocaust imagery (Gubar, 169). And according to Camille Roman, in “Bitter Strawberries” she condemns the militarism and xenophobia of the Cold War era. (250) (All morning in the strawberry field/ they talked about the Russians.[...]/ 'Bomb them off the map.'/'We ought to have bombed them long ago.'/'Don't,' pleaded the little girl With blond braids./

Moreover, Sylvia Plath and all her female contemporaries were raised in an America that conditioned their development by strict female standards. She had to face the social and cultural obstacles that prevented her from becoming a writer. Moreover, she had to face her own inner conflict of complying with those strict female standards of society and be a good daughter, wife and mother, or be herself. This conflict is likely to be the source of many of her personal tensions and anxieties of her own life and writing. “Woman as the willed product of her culture rather than the person she truly is: surely this is Plath’s conflict,” according to Linda W. Wagner. (36)

- **A Confessional Poet**

According to *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature* confessional poetry is a term principally applied to the self-revealing style of writing and use of intimate subject matter adopted and pioneered in the U.S. by Robert Lowell, who was Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton's professor in a writing seminar at Boston University. Confessional Poetry was born in the late 50's. "A period of highly controlled, formal, and impersonal poetry, dominated by the likes of Richard Wilbur and Anthony Hecht, gave way with surprising rapidity to one of unrestrained, exceedingly personal free verse, often about extreme emotional states, by such poets as John Berryman, Anne Sexton, and W. D. Snodgrass." (Bawer 7) Confessional poets depict their own personal experiences and become one with the poetic speaker. This poetry deals with themes that previously had been a taboo or not considered elevated enough for poetry such as mental illness, divorce, infidelity or alcoholism, that were considered excessively private to be treated in public.

As one of the most famous confessional poets Sylvia Plath has been inspired, influenced and shaped by her personal experiences and her relationship with friends and family members. And all those influences are palpable in her works. Since her early years the figure of her father has always been a shadow over her. She addresses her father in poems like "Daddy" (1962) and his influence is also appreciated in poems such as "The Beekeeper's Daughter"

Furthermore, the influence of her mother is also extremely important, maybe less evident. Her mother's influence is present in *The Bell Jar*, a semi-autobiographical novel. Likewise, Aurelia Schober's influence is evident in *Letters Home*, a collection of

letters that she wrote from 1950 to 1963, since her time in Smith College till her death. Sylvia's mother is the most common addressee and thanks to that another dimension of their relationship is portrayed, showing a much closer and confiding relationship than what is suggested in *The Bell Jar*. The relationship that Sylvia has with her mother reflects what she thought about woman stereotypes, gender roles and motherhood.

Moreover another figure that heavily influenced and inspired Sylvia was her husband, Ted Hughes. "Sylvia was so deeply inspired by the poetry of Ted [Hughes] that she took for reading and enjoying stories and folklores as per his choice. She was influenced not only by Ted [Hughes]'s poetic sensibilities but also by his strong personality" (Debata 2013)

• **General characteristics, style and themes**

The tone and style of Sylvia Plath's poetry is really diverse and varies as she changed and experienced different things in her life. Her poems can be lyrical and allegorical as "The Two Sisters of Persephone" or dark and heavy as "Daddy".

However, something that is very characteristic, personal and consistent is the imagery found in all her works. "Images play a significant role in poetry of Sylvia Plath, because the poet appealed to the readers' fantasy and imagination. The analysis of imagery in the poems of Sylvia Plath has shown that she created colourful and vivid poems with unique images" (Zhuravleva, 2014) She uses holocaust and war imagery as well as nature and colour, and imagery related to the body. Likewise, other features that remain consistent through her poetry are the thematic aspects. She usually deals with a

wide range of themes related to death, mental illness and pain, nature, motherhood and patriarchy. In this essay I will focus primarily on motherhood by analysing “Metaphors”, “Morning song”, “You’re”, “Childless Woman” and “Child”.

According to Steven Gould Axelrod, although all her poetry shares the previous characteristics, it can still be divided in four differentiated groups regarding how it evolved since her first poems till her last (75). In this essay, the analysis of the poems is based on the division that Steven Gould Axelrod proposes on his essay “The Poetry of Sylvia Plath”.

The division is chronological and determined by personal experiences that marked a turning point in her writing. The first stage is her Juvenilia that encompasses from her first poems to the ones written during her studies at Smith College (Axelrod, 75). Even though this is her early poetry it already shows some of her most characteristic interests and worries. By that time, her poems already dealt with the double standards of society and female stereotypes. She also displayed her concern with the current political events and war. This period is also characterised by the frequent allusion to other texts such as Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* or “The Emperor of Ice Cream” by Wallace Stevens mentioned paradoxically in her sonnet “A Sorcerer Bids Farewell to Seem” hoping to escape textuality. She was aware of the limits of figuration and she tried to leave back self-referential language, the “looking-glass hotel”, to find a poetry of reality “that authentic island” where things *are* instead of *seem*. (Axelrod, 75-76) In these years, Plath sets the basis of her poetry, a poetry that explores the deepest and darkest parts of the mind and psychology, politics and art. “Two Sisters of Persephone” and “Dialogue between Ghost and Priest” are some examples of poems that belong to this stage.

Growth and experimentation characterise Sylvia Plath's second stage (Axelrod, 76). This period involves her poems after Smith College until her early adulthood, her marriage to Ted Hughes and their new life together in England. The majority of the poetry that she created in this stage is collected in *The Colossus and Other Poems*. Her productions in this era display her ingenious imagery, her concern with the socially underprivileged and with psychology. The difference with her previous texts is subtle, however, this new poems show a greater distance in her writing that grants easier access to her uncanny and complex inner world. Other innovations from this period are her use of dreamlike landscapes and characters and the frequent apparition of male figures as powerful and oppressive for instance: a master or a stalker. Along with her preoccupation with patriarchal oppression, a maternal oppressive figure also makes an appearance as controlling and repulsive. The poems reflect a gender and generational oppression that she has to fight in order to find her own identity and autonomy. She had to choose either to stay indoors or face a confrontation to gain independence. Her brilliant and careful use of language shows how much she looked for poetic perfection. She is known for writing with a thesaurus in hand and some of her poems have self-referential titles as "Metaphors" or "Rhyme"

Plath's third stage is one of passion and self-discovery and goes from 1960 till her divorce in 1962 (Axelrod, 80). Despite the short expanse of this period, this is when she produced her better known poems. She continued with her interest in psychological and inner mind matters, and the importance of history; however she dealt with these topics with a new heightened theatrical style. During this stage her nature-related poems stand out. In her writings nature is represented as a hostile force and dangerous landscape. Furthermore, it is described as mysterious and despairing in order to use it as

a reflection of her own personal terrors. “The Moon and the Yew Tree” and “Ariel” are some of her most representative poems of this stage.

Finally, Plath’s fourth and final stage compresses a brief time of depression and alienation from 1962 to her suicide in 1963 (Axelrod, 87). In the poems produced in her last weeks alive she wrote compulsively about writing itself, proving that her main motivation and preoccupation was her poetry. In the majority of her latest poems her body is a metaphor of her writing power and self-objects are described as worn out and weakened; and her children and poems that once were promising as dead and dried.

• **Analysis of the selected poems.**

Taking all these characteristics into account, I will analyse a selection of Sylvia Plath’s poems. These poems have been selected because they offer a significant view of Plath’s different approaches to motherhood. Even though all of them focus on the same themes and topics, the poems differ in tone and belong to different stages of Sylvia Plath’s poetry. They show the nature and evolution of her struggle with maternity and how her conception of the world, her relationship with Ted Hughes and her mental health influenced her conflicted views. The poems are analysed in chronological order to provide a clearer examination of the evolution of her relationship with motherhood and maternity in her poetry.

It has to be taken into consideration, that although the theme of motherhood is fairly universal, the chosen poems were written in the late 1950’s and in the early 60’s.

The 50's were a decade marked by the shadow of the Second World War and the Cold War. With the end of those wars, many women that were previously working were urged to leave their jobs and resume their labour as housewives and mothers. Society's pressure to marry and bear children was even bigger than in the immediate past. This is why, in the selected poems of Sylvia Plath's this pressure is present and enhances her tension and clashing views on motherhood.

- **“Metaphors”**

First, the poem “Metaphors” was written in the final part of her second period on 20 March 1959, in her stage of experimentation and drastic growth. The poem was written before Sylvia Plath had her two children when she mistakenly thought that she was pregnant. The poem is “ironic, nine lines, nine syllables in each. They are never perfect, but I think have goodnesses.” (Plath, 536)

The title foreshadows the nine metaphors that will appear in each verse of the composition. However, the original title of the poem was “Metaphors for a Pregnant Woman” until Plath decided to change it to simply “Metaphors”. With this change, “Metaphors” acquired a riddle-like structure similar to the one in “You’re” and it became a riddle that the reader has to solve. “I’m a riddle in nine syllables,” This poem, however, focuses on the poetic speaker as a pregnant woman instead of focusing on the babe as in “You’re”. These lines deal with maternity, the nine-month pregnancy period, and how the female body changes as the baby grows. “Her journals record her concern for the possible bodily symptoms of pregnancy as a strong theme at this time” (Bassnett, 87). “The processes of “Metaphors” do not transform external nature or the foetus

within, but pose and recompose the female body itself, a body pregnant with «I am»” (Wurst, 28)

The poem starts with a playful tone and has several comical and humorous touches “A melon strolling on two tendrils.” Nonetheless, as in many of her other poems at the end there is a dramatic change in tone. “I’m a means, a stage, a cow in calf/[...]Boarded the train there’s no getting off” The metaphoric mastery is used as a defence against a feared loss of self-control. She is now unable to control the pregnancy and how everything will turn out (Van Dyne 198). According to Helen Vendler, this last line is the only line grim enough to wake a reader’s response (273).

Furthermore, Gayle Wurst, offers another reading to the poem. He claims that the pregnant woman exists merely as a metaphor: a “riddle”, “an elephant”, a “means”. The female body is of literary value as long as it produces (o gives birth) to metaphors, new relationships between the things of the world and the “I” of the poem. In this function these metaphors suspiciously resemble the age-old exploitation of the female body, a gold-mine for the male poet’s “I” (28). He also points out that this poem constitutes the first time that the image of a train is used as an increasingly violent metaphor. From this point on, violent train imagery will become a staple in her poetry as in “Getting There” (30).

- **“You’re” and “Morning Song”**

Second, “Morning Song” and “You’re” are poems which belong to Sylvia Plath’s third stage of poetry of passion and self-discovery. Both are addressed to her children.

However, “You’re” is addressed to a still unborn child while “Morning Song” is addressed to a baby that has already been born. Also, the two poems were published in *Ariel*. “Morning Song” is the first poem of the collection because of Plath’s desire for it to start with the word “love” and “You’re” is poem number 25. The exact date when “You’re” was written remains unknown but it was sometime between January and February of 1960 while Sylvia Plath was on the last term of her pregnancy; and “Morning Song” was written on 19 February 1961 after Frieda’s birth.

On the one hand, “You’re” is addressed to her yet unborn baby. The poem is made up by two nine-lined stanzas that represent the nine month gestation period. This composition does not have a fixed metrical or rhyme pattern. In the 18 lines of the poem the baby is described inside the womb but the words baby, foetus or child are never explicitly mentioned. “Feet to the stars, and moon-skulled,/Gilled like a fish”.

As Susan R. Van Dyne claims, for Sylvia Plath making poems and making babies were persistent metaphors for each other (144) “You’re” is a riddle in which the child is described by shocking similes “[You’re] like a sprat in a pickle jug”. These comparisons create a vivid and visual imagery that reinforces the excitement of expecting the child to be born. The poet anticipates a happy ending to the nine month pregnancy and to the riddle that the reader has been guessing. “Right, like a well-done sum. /A clean slate, with your own face on.”

As the poem is presented as a game the tone is playful and joyful, fitting for a mother that is eager to meet her first born child.

On the other hand, “Morning Song” consists of six stanzas of three verses each and it does not follow any fixed metric or rhyme pattern either. According to Carmen Birkle, “Morning Song” is a great example of the struggle between Sylvia Plath’s wish for social norm-fulfilment and fear of motherhood. (74)

At the beginning of the poem, birth is considered merely a mechanical event by comparing the baby to a “fat gold watch”. And throughout the poem, the parents have ambivalent and mixed feelings to the child: they admire the baby like a “New Statue” in a “drafty museum”, however, they also fear it: “your nakedness / Shadows our safety”. She knows that the baby presents a threat in particular to her own situation as a woman poet. Earning money and writing at the same time was already a difficult endeavour and a newborn would make it even harder. This worry about how to balance her role as a mother and her role as a poet is a concern that already appears in some of her journal entries from 1957.

I couldn't write a word about it, although I did in my head. The horror,
day by day more sure, of being pregnant. [...] our future, Ted with no job,
me with no job, the avalanche of bills putting us into debt, killed our
spiritual and psychic selves by freezing them into a stasis out of the
necessity of sacrificing everything to earning money. (Plath, 339)

In the quotation from her journals also appears the question of identity, Plath is scared of having lost her own identity to the baby, and thus, rejects the imposed mother role: "I'm no more your mother / Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the wind's hand." The mother becomes a cloud as if she were just a means so the baby was born and suggests that after the birth of the baby the mother will just disappear as if her only task were already fulfilled.

Kate Moses, however, thinks that this stanza is too easily read as a sign of Plath's hostility towards motherhood (112-113). She believes that Plath is equating the cloud distilling into the rain to the mother's evaporating role in the child's life until it becomes separate. Furthermore, she claims that in the final lines of the poem the poetic speaker completely and willingly effaces allowing the child complete autonomy and at the same time stands back to admire the child's expression.

The ending of the poem has a lighter tone. In the fifth stanza when the mother "cow-heavy" and wearing a "floral Victorian nightgown" approaches the crying baby. Or in the last stanza in which the baby babbles vocalic sounds as if singing (the baby singing is probably the reason why the poem is titled "Morning Song"). The appearance of flying balloons at the end of the poem represents the life of the new baby in a positive light. Additionally, the end of the poem includes the first of many references to natural elements that are a staple in her poetry of this period and it is used to enhance her conflicts. "A far sea moves in my ear".

These poems were written in a relatively short period on time, are addressed to the same child and revolve around the same themes, motherhood and maternity; however, by the time when Plath wrote "Morning Song" her daughter had already being born so her conflict with motherhood and being a mother increases. Sylvia Plath always struggled to comply with what was expected of her for being a woman and what she really wanted to do. In the society of the time it was believed that in order to be a successful and fulfilled woman it was essential to become a mother. So, before having the baby she is ecstatic and happy but after having it, her feelings are much more complex. She loved her baby but she might have not felt completely satisfied and

accomplished just by having become mother. Her goals went further than being a devoted wife and mother.

Moreover, even if the poems are free versed and do not have full rhymes, the vocabulary and words used are selected very deliberately by Sylvia Plath in order to add a certain musicality and rhythm. For example, in “You’re” there are several instances of alliterations as “down/dodo’s/mode” or “moon/spool/fool” and in “Morning Song” “own slow, cow, nightgown, swallows”. Besides, in both poems there is a peculiar combination of enjambments, caesuras and run-on lines that create a unique cadence in the poems.

- **“Childless Woman” and “Child”**

Finally, the following pair of poems belongs to her last stage of poetry, written in her last months alive after the birth of her two children. In this period of her life her depression and mental problems are patent in her writings and affected and changed the way in which she considered many aspects and themes. Although motherhood, her relationship with her children and her role as a mother were always conflicting topics in which her feelings were always clashing, never had these themes been treated in such a hopeless light.

“Childless Woman” is a poem written on 1 December 1962. It was written barely two months before her suicide. The poem consists of six three-lined stanzas. These verses have the severe, bare and harsh tone characteristic of the poetry of this

period of depression and withdrawal. The poetic speaker is a woman unable to have children because her womb is useless.

Birkle considers that “Childless Woman” expresses the search for escape into mothering in which a woman hopelessly tries to have a baby and create a child in her image (94). However, due to her incapacity to have children she is rendered without a future or purpose “My landscape is a line hand with no lines, /The roads bunched to a knot” which eventually will lead to her death “My funeral/ Gleaming with the mouths of corpses”. According to Tim Kendall the association of hills and death is common in the poems from April of 1962 and beyond. (118-119)

In contrast with the poems produced in previous stages of her poetry, this poem has shorter and more concise lines that enhance the dark and stark nature of the poem. It is also characterised by the great amount of anaphora, parallelisms and repetitions that emphasise the inability of the poetic speaker to escape her future or rather lack of it. “This body/This ivory” “My landscape[...]/My funeral”

The poems focuses on the devastating feelings that a woman unable to have children would probably feel and it might have been inspired by Sylvia Plath’s personal experiences after having an abortion some years prior.

Second, “Child” is a poem written on 28 January 1963. It is addressed to her son Nicholas and it is formed by four stanzas of three verses. The poem describes the baby and his innocence and purity.

Kathleen Connors highlights the colour contrast in this poem .The poetic speaker considers the baby’s clear eyes the only beautiful thing and this description is followed

by several objects associated with basic colours: a duck (yellow), snowdrops (white) a stalk (green) and a pool (blue). These colours are set in contrast to the unhappy and dead darkness (83-84). The poem ends with a “Wringing of hands, this dark / Ceiling without a star”. The dark and colourless world surrounds the child instead of the previous colour. The constant juxtaposition of colours and darkness symbolizes the purity of the babe, against the hard reality of the world and the desire of the mother to give brightness, hope and lovely experiences to her child in this forlorn world. Furthermore, the clear colour palette and the words used to convey it also suggest open spaces, nature, light, clarity, joy... in contrast to the darkness and prison-like confinement of a dark room.

The poem was written after her divorce from Ted Hughes and after she had recently become a newly single mother. She was suffering a serious depression and that is the reason why in the poem his child's eyes are the only source of beauty and solace she found in an obscure and terrifying world, and why she believed in her incapability to be a good mother and provide to his children happiness and light.

To sum up, Sylvia Plath's inner conflict is evident throughout her poetry. In her first poems, her main concern is choosing between motherhood or a professional career as a writer that would make her feel accomplished. She was scared of forgetting who she was after having a child, scared of losing her identity. And, on the other hand, scared of not fulfilling the standards of society and have children. Because not having children would mean that she was not the perfect daughter that gives grandchildren to her parents and the good wife that provides children to the marriage.

However, after having children of her own, her troubles increased. Her negative and darker views on motherhood peaked as she grew older, hand in hand with her depression and personal turmoil. She was not only scared of losing her identity to the baby, but also, of not being a good enough mother that protected her children from the dangers that she saw in the world. She did not want her children to suffer as she was suffering and her excitement to see her children for the first time clashed with her anxiety about her inability to protect them from the world.

• Conclusion

Sylvia Plath is one of the most popular and influential authors of contemporary literature. Her poetry production is considered one of the best examples of confessional poetry all over the world and her only novel, *The Bell Jar*, is widely acclaimed too.

However, her influence and her popularity are not only a consequence of the masterful use of imagery that characterises her poetry. Neither are they a consequence of the easiness she had to leave a long-lasting impression on the reader's mind by the use of shocking and ingenious metaphors. The main reason why she is to this day one of the best-known poets is the themes that she explores in her poetry. Besides themes that are common to many authors such as life, death or nature, she dealt with subjects that were taboo in her times and that are still relevant nowadays. In her poems, she wrote about mental illness, patriarchy, the double standards of society, how different genders have different expectations etc. This has made her a pioneer among women writers and a favourite among young feminist readers.

Her whole literary production was determined and shaped by the historical background that surrounded her upbringing. She grew up after the events of the Second World War, the Holocaust and the Cold War, events that are frequently mentioned in her compositions. Furthermore, the standards that society had for women and the pressure of patriarchy were also a great influence on her writing. She frequently felt the tension of doing what she really wanted and pursuing a writing career or complying with the female standards of her times and focus on marriage and children. As a woman in the 50's she was expected to marry, to have children and to stay at home taking care

of her family; however, she felt the deep necessity to write and wanted to pursue a career as a writer.

Finally, Sylvia Plath is an expert on portraying her most profound grieving and on putting into paper her most private conflicts. For instance, in many of her poems, she writes about motherhood, her thoughts about it, and how becoming a mother affects women. The physical pain of becoming a mother, the changes of the body, the struggle to not lose your identity to the child, and the incapability to protect the child from the darkness of the world are some of the topics she explores in her poems.

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Morning Song

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
The midwife slapped your footsoles, and **your bald** cry
Took its place among the elements.
Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.
In a drafty museum, your nakedness
Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls.
I'm no more your mother
Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow
EfFacement at the wind's hand.
All night your moth-breath
Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen :
A far sea moves in my ear.
One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral
In my Victorian nightgown.
Your mouth opens clean as a cat's. The window square
Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try
Your handful of notes;
The clear vowels rise like balloons.
19 February 1961

Retrieved from *Collected Poem, Sylvia Plath*. (1981) pp. 156-157

You're

Clownlike, happiest on your hands,
Feet to the stars, and moon-skulled,
Gilled like a fish. A common-sense
Thumbs-down on the dodo's mode.
Wrapped up in yourself like a spool,
Trawling your dark as owls do.
Mute as a turnip from the Fourth
Of July to All Fools' Day,
O high-riser, my little loaf.
Vague as fog and looked for like mail.
Farther off than Australia.
Bent-backed Atlas, our traveled prawn.
Snug as a bud and at home
Like a sprat in a pickle jug.
A creel of eels, all ripples.
Jumpy as a Mexican bean.
Right, like a well-done sum.
A clean slate, with your own face on.
January!February 1960

Retrieved from *Collected Poem, Sylvia Plath*. (1981) pp. 141

Childless Woman

The womb
Rattles its pod, the moon
Discharges itself from the tree with nowhere to go.
My landscape is a hand with no lines,
The roads bunched to a knot,
The knot myself,
Myself the rose you achieve—
This body,
This ivory
Ungodly as a child's shriek.
Spiderlike, I spin mirrors,
Loyal to my image,
Uttering nothing but blood—
Taste it, dark red!
And my forest
My funeral,
And this hill and this
Gleaming with the mouths of corpses.
/ *December 1962*

Retrieved from *Collected Poem, Sylvia Plath*. (1981) pp. 259

Child

Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.
I want to fill it with color and ducks,
The zoo of the new
Whose names you meditate—
April snowdrop, Indian pipe,
Little
Stalk without wrinkle,
Pool in which images
Should be grand and classical
Not this troublous
Wringing of hands, this dark
Ceiling without a star.
28 January 1961

Retrieved from *Collected Poem, Sylvia Plath.* (1981) pp. 265

Metaphors

I'm a riddle in nine syllables,
An elephant, a ponderous house,
A melon strolling on two tendrils.
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!
This loafs big with its yeasty rising.
Money's new-minted in this fat purse.
I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.
I've eaten a bag of green apples,
Boarded the train there's no getting off.
20 March 1959

Retrieved from *Collected Poem, Sylvia Plath.* (1981) pp.116